

For the Birds June 10, 2007

* Much of today's service was interactive. What follows is the concluding message.

We don't really have enough time to hear all your ideas about what these birds were experiencing in the course of this brief video, but we did this same kind of thing with the Worship team one night, and one of the first responses we got when we asked what was going on was: "Well, it's pretty clear that the little birds aren't very excited about the big bird wanting to be with them." Of course, there are many other themes that could come out of the video, too, but that one really resonated with me.

I think part of the reason I could see it so clearly was that I, like some of you, have experienced what it's like to be on the outside looking in. I could really identify with the big bird that really wanted to be of the gang, or more appropriately, one of the flock.

However, the problem was he was different from the others. He didn't look quite the same; he was certainly much larger, and he didn't always seem to get what was going on. He just wanted to be with them, and the little birds were having none of it.

How often do we have situations like that in our daily lives? Maybe it's at school when the new kid arrives in class, perhaps not quite looking or acting like the others. I recall an experience like that during my very first year of teaching. This was in Bloomington Indiana in a junior high school. Our principal at that school was of the opinion that, if you could speak English, you could teach it, so almost every teacher in the building taught at least one English class.

Well, mine happened to be the last period of the day with the accelerated 8th graders, and was I in over my head! It was made even more pronounced when one student was missing during the first few days of class. The other kids just kept saying to "just wait...just wait until he arrives." They'd sort of mimic what they thought he was like, and it wasn't very complimentary.

Finally the day arrived when the missing student appeared, and he was a bit different from the others. He was wearing sandals before it was fashionable to do so, wore horn-rimmed glasses, and carried a

briefcase. However, he was an excellent student, always doing every bit of homework he was assigned. Then he always opened his briefcase and pulled out one of the books in it and went on reading and studying. This caused the kids to make even more fun of him behind his back, and they shut him out from their groups and activities. In many, many ways, the other students were like the little birds in our video, and the lone student was like the big bird.

I have to tell you that this story had a much different ending than the one in the video. When all those students were 9th graders, they began to mature, and little by little, they grew to respect the young man with the briefcase. They began to welcome him when he arrived in class, and talked to him after class was over.

And I'll never forget the greatest accomplishment! It was when he came to the freshman dance at the end of the year, and he danced. The kids were thrilled, and he was grinning from ear to ear. Finally, he felt welcomed as a peer.

What does this have to do with you and me? My guess is that there are times when some of us are like the little birds—making fun of others, closing them out, or maybe just ignoring them or not seeing them at all. This can happen at school, at work, in our neighborhoods, even at church. In fact, I know folks who have felt excluded from their churches, and that can even happen here at The Garden.

You and I can change that. We can make sure we are welcoming to the new co-worker, to the new student in class, to the newcomer in our neighborhood, to the first, second or third timer here at The Garden. It's always easy to talk with the folks we know best and ignore the others, but maybe we need to re-evaluate our actions, and try to be more welcoming and more inclusive.

That's what our Bible passage is encouraging. It reads like this: "Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it!"